THE RELIGION OF AMERICAN GREATNESS

WHAT'S WRONG WITH CHRISTIAN NATIONALISM

PAUL D. MILLER

FOREWORD BY
DAVID FRENCH

ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com.

ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

1

CHRISTIANITY AND AMERICAN IDENTITY

"**America is winning again.** America is respected again. Because we are putting America first. . . . We're taking care of ourselves for a change, folks. . . . You know they have a word, it sort of became old fashioned, it's called a 'nationalist.' And I say, really? We're not supposed to use that word. You know what I am? I'm a nationalist. Okay? I'm a nationalist." President Donald J. Trump proudly spoke these words to a crowd in Houston in October 2018. The crowd roared its approval and broke into a chant: "USA! USA! USA!"[1]

The media treated this as news, but to close observers it had been evident for a long time.[2] Trump plainly was not a conservative as defined by the political right since the 1950s. It was at first hard to identify Trump's place on the political map because nationalism had been underground, so to speak, for a few generations. In its place, conservatism, as articulated by thinkers like William Buckley and Russell Kirk and practiced by statesmen like Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, served as the quasi-official ideology of the political right. Conservatism stressed the paramount value of human liberty within a framework of limited government. But Trump had at various points endorsed abortion, trade restrictions, gun control, and other positions at odds with the modern Republican Party and the conservative movement. Trump did not use the rhetoric of liberty, limited government, or constitutionalism. He

[1]CBS News, "Trump: 'I'm a Nationalist,'" YouTube video, posted October 22, 2018, www.youtube.com/watch?v=sazitj4x6YI.

[2]Thomas Wright, "Trump's 19th Century Foreign Policy," *Politico Magazine*, January 20, 2016.

talked about national greatness, cutting advantageous trade deals, and looking out for "America First." Trump's success illustrated a broader phenomenon. By 2016 it had become evident that "conservatism"—its intellectual coherence, philosophical depth and rigor, and the consonance some saw between it and biblical political theology—was the working ideology of a tiny circle of intellectuals, not the voice of a broad movement. The political right was—and, in fact, had long been—far more indebted to nationalism than to conservatism. Donald Trump recognized this reality and rode it to the White House.[3]

American nationalism is infused with the rhetoric and symbols of Christianity. When Trump pitched himself as a champion of regular Americans, he repeatedly and explicitly cast it as an appeal to Christians. In June 2016 he told the Faith and Freedom Coalition, "We will respect and defend Christian Americans."[4] In August 2016, he told a group of pastors in Orlando, "Your power has been totally taken away," but under a Trump administration, "you'll have great power to do good things."[5] In September 2016, Trump told the Values Voters Summit, "[In] a Trump administration, our Christian heritage will be cherished, protected, defended, like you've never seen before. Believe me."[6] At the same venue the following year, after his election, Trump reminded them of his promise. "I pledged that, in a Trump administration, our nation's religious heritage would be cherished, protected, and defended like you have never seen before," he claimed. "That's what's happening. . . . We are stopping cold the attacks on Judeo-Christian values. . . . We will defend our faith and protect our traditions."[7] In June 2020, amid nationwide protests against police brutality and racial injustice, Trump posed for a photo holding a Bible in front of St. John's Church, a historic church one block north of the White House (after police forcibly evicted protesters in the area) to "show a message of

[3]Anatol Lievin noted as early as 2004, more than a decade before Trump, that the Republican Party was more accurately understood as the American Nationalist Party; see his *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[4]Donald Trump, "Remarks at Faith and Freedom Coalition Conference," June 10, 2016, www.c-span.org/video/?410912-4/donald-trump-addresses-faith-freedom-coalition-conference.

[5]Donald Trump, "Remarks in Orlando, Florida," August 11, 2016, www.c-span.org/video/?413877-1/donald-trump-addresses-evangelical-leaders-orlando-florida.

[6]Donald Trump, "Values Voter Summit Remarks," September 9, 2016, www.politico.com/story/2016/09/full-text-trump-values-voter-summit-remarks-227977.

[7]Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at the 2017 Values Voter Summit," October 13, 2017, www1.cbn.com/cbnnews/politics/2017/october/president-trumps-entire-faith-filled-speech-at-the-values-voters-summit.

resilience and determination" according to the White House Press Secretary. Days later Trump said he believed "Christians think it was a beautiful picture."

Nor is this recent: American Christians have long merged their religious faith with American identity. In the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, Americans regularly described the United States as a "new Israel"; in the twentieth century, as a "Christian nation." When they do so, they are expressing a collection of beliefs: that to be a faithful Christian in America, one must be loyal to the American nation; that the American nation is defined in part by Christian values and Christian culture; that it is, in some sense, the outworking of Christianity in political form; that it may enjoy a special relationship with God; and that American Christians should ensure their government keeps Christianity as the predominant ordering framework for our public life. American national identity has long been defined by many Americans to include Christianity as a necessary part of it. Since at least the Civil War, Americans have regularly read 2 Chronicles 7:14 ("If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land") and Psalm 33:12 ("Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD") and applied it to themselves and the United States: Americans are the people called by God's name, and the United States is the nation whose God is the Lord. Seen in this light, the Christian Right, a broad social and political movement that arose in the late 1970s, is not new in its effort to define the United States as a Christian nation. Rather, the movement stands solidly within the tradition of American Christians—mostly White—who define their sacred and secular identities in terms of each other. The Christian Right is the latest in a long line of White Protestant American nationalists.

In response to Trump's campaign pitch aimed at them, 81 percent of White, self-identified evangelical voters cast their votes for him, and they remained a core base of his support throughout his presidency. Their acceptance of Trump suggests that many American evangelicals have accepted nationalism as their political philosophy: at a minimum, as something that is consistent with their faith; at most, as the necessary political implication of Christian belief and practice. In a recent survey, a staggering 65 percent of Americans believed it was "fairly" or "very" important that a citizen be a Christian to be "truly American," including 75 percent of those scoring highest on measures

of nationalism.[8] In other recent polls, 29 percent of Americans believed that "the federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation," and almost two-thirds that "God has granted America a special role in human history."[9]

Christian nationalism asserts that there is something identifiable as an American "nation," distinct from other nations; that American nationhood is and should remain defined by Christianity or Christian cultural norms; and that the American people and their government should actively work to defend, sustain, and cultivate America's Christian culture, heritage, and values. Historians have often argued that a generic Protestant Christianity served as the *de facto* established religion of the United States until the 1960s. A Christian nationalist is someone who believes that historical fact is normative for today, that the United States should return to the days of a quasi-official, nondenominational (Judeo-)Christian establishment that privileges Christian norms, values, symbols, culture, and rhetoric in American public life and public policy. They do not advocate repeal of the First Amendment, but they do favor a strongly "accommodationist" interpretation of it in which the government is permitted to favor religion over irreligion, and even favor America's historically predominant religious tradition (i.e., Christianity) over new or different ones. Christian nationalists believe that the American nation was, is, *and should remain* a "Christian nation"—that America's identity as a Christian nation is not merely a historical fact but a moral imperative, an ideological goal, and a policy program for the future, which also means that defining the nation's religious and cultural identity is rightfully part of the government's responsibility.

What are the origins, historical development, key beliefs, and political and cultural implications of American Christian nationalism? Is it a good thing or a bad thing? What is its relationship to the ideals of the American experiment? What does nationalist governance look like in practice, and what effects has it had on American society and the world when they have had opportunities to pursue their agenda in the past? What is the difference, if any, between nationalism and patriotism? What is the right way to love one's country? To these

[8]Bart Bonikowski and Paul DiMaggio, "Varieties of American Popular Nationalism," *American Sociological Review* 81, no. 5 (2016): 949-80.

[9]Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 10.

historical and political questions, we can add a host of theological ones. What is the relationship between Christian nationalism and Christianity? Between Christian nationalism and other forms of Christian political engagement? Does the Christian faith permit, or possibly even require, its adherents to believe in the tenets of nationalism? In short, do American Christians have to be nationalists? Do Americans have to be Christians? These questions raise broader and deeper questions about the relationship between religion and politics, questions that have been asked ever since the Pharisees used a question about taxes to suss out Jesus' take on collaboration versus resistance toward civil government, and about humankind's ultimate loyalties.

THE ARGUMENTS OF THIS BOOK

This is a book about the historical development, key beliefs, and political, cultural, and theological implications of Christian nationalism. I argue that Christian nationalism is a bad political theory, illiberal in theory and practice, and at odds with key features of the American experiment. In chapter two I clarify what exactly nationalism is, broadly understood. I review the conventional distinction between nationalism and patriotism, and I affirm the positive value of patriotism for both practical and theological reasons. I start with an affirmation of patriotism because I want to stress that my critique of nationalism is not a rejection of all forms of loyalty and affection for our worldly communities and, in fact, some kind of local affection is an important safeguard against the unhealthy kind. I then review the academic literature on nationalism to define the concept, draw its boundaries, and help distinguish it from patriotism. Nationalism is the belief that humanity is divisible into internally coherent, mutually distinct cultural units which merit political independence and human loyalty because of their purported ability to provide meaning, purpose, and value in human life; and that governments are supposed to protect and promote the cultural identities of their respective nations.

I then take up the difficult question of American nationalism and its relationship to Christianity. In chapter three I review the arguments from advocates of Christian nationalism to define the ideology. American Christian nationalism defines America as the cultural nation of "Anglo-Protestantism," as some of its scholarly advocates have recently avowed. Christian nationalists

believe that the American government should sustain and defend the nation's Anglo-Protestant cultural identity to remain faithful to America's past, ensure the survival of American liberty, and secure God's blessing.

I then move on to critique Christian nationalism. In chapters four and five I argue that there are some clear problems with any form of nationalism: cultures have blurry boundaries, which means they are a poor foundation for political boundaries. When governments try to force political and cultural boundaries to overlap, the effort inevitably leads them down an illiberal path. Governments end up treating minorities—ethnic, racial, religious, linguistic, or otherwise—as second-class citizens, or worse. I argue that governments should not try to promote or enforce a national cultural template. State-sponsored cultural engineering involves the government tilting the playing field, or putting its thumb on the scales, to favor one cultural template and disfavor others. Far from promoting national unity, the effort promotes national division and fragmentation because nationalism is simply another form of identity politics.

Christian nationalism is, in effect, identity politics for tribal evangelicals who confuse their particular culture for the nation as a whole. Evangelicalism, when it indulges in this kind of political engagement, is acting less like a religious community seeking to embody the universal faith than one among many particularistic or tribal ethnoreligious sects lobbying for power and prestige. In short, nationalism, considered as a political theory, is arbitrary, incoherent, and illiberal. If taken to its logical conclusion, nationalism undermines the foundations of a free and open society, including religious freedom and racial or ethnic pluralism. I also show that Anglo-Protestant culture is *not* necessary to sustain the political institutions of liberalism and democracy. In chapter six I review "nations" and "peoples" in the Bible, critique nationalists' misuse of the Bible, and discuss how Christians today should think about "the nations" and about ancient Israel. I suggest that nationalism, in its ideal form, is a kind of idolatry.

In chapters seven and eight I argue that, in light of the previous chapters, it is easier to see the Christian Right as the latest instance of White Christians' efforts to push for a strong Christian American identity—or, to put it another way, the Christian Right has always included a strong element of nationalism among its goals, mixing uneasily with Christian republicanism. To the extent that it is nationalist, the movement's political agenda is rooted more in

cultural particularity than theological universality. Much of American evangelicalism is acting more like a cultural tribe, an ethnoreligious sect advocating for its own power and protection, rather than a people from every tribe and nation advocating for universal principles of justice, flourishing, and the common good.

That is troubling by itself, but there is another problem. Many evangelicals do not recognize the difference between their particular culture and the common good; they believe that advocating for one must include the other. The effort to pass off their particular culture as a universal template for the nation is fraught with dangers, both for itself and for the nation. The movement is illiberal, as other nationalist movements around the world and its predecessors in American history have been. Even though the Christian Right today does not overtly appeal to racist or sectarian arguments in the same way as past nationalist movements in American history, it is nonetheless complicit with *illiberalism*—an illiberality that continues to show up in how nationalists think about race, racial inequality, and our responsibility (or lack thereof) to remedy the sins of the past. In chapter nine I use this way of understanding the Christian Right to explain its relationship to Donald Trump.

In chapter ten I suggest the outlines of what I hope is a sounder theology of the nation. Despite my critique of nationalism, I do not believe the answer is to reject nationality altogether. We can find some suggestion in the Bible that God blessed humanity with corporate political memberships as one layer among many in our multifaceted identities. The challenge is to find a way to embrace and celebrate our particular differences while avoiding the idolatry that so often attaches to them. Nations are not evil, but the record of nation*alism* in history is overwhelmingly one of idolatry and oppression. I conclude with a broader reflection on American politics and culture and with a note on the role that pastors and churches might play in the work of repair.

Is the marriage of Christianity with American nationalism a forgivable quirk over an unimportant doctrinal matter, a lovable excess in patriotism and piety? The burden of this book is to show that nationalism is incoherent in theory, illiberal in practice, and, I fear, often idolatrous in our hearts. Christian nationalism in American history has been devastating to both church and state, in the nation's race relations, its foreign policy, and in the church's witness. The marriage represents an American and evangelical version of Caesaropapism, the appropriation of the church's moral authority and evangelical zeal

to the cause of secular greatness. It can be hard for Christians to recognize this because, truthfully, America is unique and, compared to other great powers today and in ages past, relatively just and humane—and of course it is true that Christianity has been extraordinarily influential in the nation's history, politics, and culture. But that is part of the problem: When America is most just, it is most tempting for Americans to treat it as a precursor to the kingdom of God, reducing the church to the chaplaincy of American nationalism. The opposite case is an even greater problem: When America is at its worst, when it does not live up to its creed—as happens sadly all too often—American Christians nonetheless continue to act as cheerleaders and defenders of the nation, Christians have blessed sin and called evil good. We have taken the name of Christ as a moral fig leaf while shilling for the whore of Babylon.

DEFINING TERMS

This book deals with abstract concepts like culture, religion, heritage, ideology, and more. One of the key points of discussion is whether and to what extent "ideology" is separable from "culture"—whether the ideas of ordered liberty, democracy, and human rights can be separated from the Anglo-Protestant culture from which they first arose. This discussion will hardly be intelligible unless I spend a few moments defining terms. These definitions are not exclusive of one another.

Ideology is a linked set of normative ideas about the social and political order, specifically ideas about how society and politics *ought* to be ordered. It is a set of beliefs about justice, the right ordering of human societies. Communism is an ideology that claims justice is the abolition of class distinctions and private property and the organization of society under the dictatorship of the proletariat. Fascism is an ideology that claims justice is the empowerment and unity of a race, nation, or people under an authoritarian government that has total control to regulate all aspects of society for the good of its nation, usually involving militarism and forcible repression of dissent. Classical liberalism is an ideology that claims justice is majority rule plus minority rights, as ordered by a limited government under the rule of law (virtually all Americans are "liberal" in the classical sense; as noted in the preface, I use the term *progressivism* to refer to the American political left). Other ideologies include republicanism, progressivism, Islamism, conservatism, socialism, and

—depending on one's definition—multiculturalism, authoritarianism, and more. (Another terminological clarification: I use *republicanism* and *civic republicanism* with a small *r* to denote a belief in republican forms of government, including features such as popular sovereignty, the rule of law, checks and balances among divided branches of government, and so on. I use *Republican* with a capital *R* to denote the Republican Party, which is decreasingly republican in outlook.) This book is primarily an examination of the ideology of nationalism, especially American nationalism, especially the kind that uses Christian symbols and rhetoric.

What about religion? The famous anthropologist Clifford Geertz defined religion as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[10] Religion is a set of beliefs and practices about what is most basic, fundamental and important in human life. Christianity is obviously a religion—the one true religion, I believe—alongside many other religions. What is the relationship between religion and ideology? Many, perhaps most, ideologies emerge from prior religious commitments, though that does not mean there is a deterministic relationship between them. More importantly, some ideologies are themselves simply substitute religions. Read the definition of religion again and note how well it might describe communism, fascism, or even progressivism. In chapter six I suggest that the ideal type of nationalism also falls into this category.

One argument nationalists regularly make is that they want to preserve their nation's heritage. Our "heritage" is our inheritance, a thing passed down from generations and valued for its representation of the past and its ability to give us a vicarious linkage to our ancestors. In that sense, nationalists claim they simply want to preserve what came before, to honor the past. In chapter ten I will strongly endorse the idea of *history* as a component of national identity, but not quite in the way nationalists mean when they invoke *heritage*. History is the contemporary, scholarly effort to reconstruct the past as faithfully as possible based on surviving artifacts and documents. By contrast, nationalists often use the word *heritage* as a catchall for the parts of the past they

[10]Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 90.

prefer, or for a fabricated version of the past that never really existed. As one scholar put it, partisans invent heritage by "mining the historical record for identity traits that the interpreter believes should be key ingredients in the recipe for present-day identity."[11] And they invoke heritage to justify their policy preferences in the present, as a way of claiming that their political agenda—their ideology—is actually rooted in the past and carries its authority: they make "heritage" part of "ideology." Nationalists end up *dis*honoring the past because they weaponize it, select only the parts most flattering to themselves, or, somewhat contradictorily, assert that we must honor our heritage regardless of its content.

Another argument nationalists make is that liberal ideas and liberal ideology is rooted in Western or Anglo-Protestant "culture" and cannot survive apart from it. What is culture? This is probably the hardest word to define, but also the most important for my argument. Nationalists are sometimes guilty of tautology, of simply defining their terms to include one another. If culture includes all of ideology—if ideology is nothing but a subset of culture—then by definition ideology cannot be separated from culture, and nationalists can claim victory. Geertz's famous definition is that culture is "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life." More concisely, "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs."[12] If culture encompasses all possible "patterns of meanings," then religion and ideology and heritage are all parts of a culture.

I am not satisfied with this way of thinking about culture, at least not for the purposes of this book. Nationalists rarely recognize or discuss the important but rather abstract relationship between ideas and culture. Can ideas have agency outside of their home culture? The irony is that the advocates for nationalism claim they are the ones who take ideas seriously and who are working hardest to protect the ideals of the American creed. They believe that protecting the creed means protecting the culture and heritage from which it first sprang. But that approach treats ideas as wholly dependent on cultural

[11]Nathan Finn, email to author, December 18, 2020.
[12]Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 89, 5.

circumstances. In fact, their stance does not take ideas seriously at all; they do not believe ideas exert an independent effect on the world. To them, ideas are a byproduct, an epiphenomenon, a function of something deeper and more fundamental: "culture." Culture does all the work; once we get the culture right, ideas inexorably follow—and by extension, they believe ideas cannot survive without their supporting culture.

I am not satisfied with this because, as I discuss in chapter four, it is simply not true. History, evidence, and social science easily show that some of the major defining ideas of classical liberalism, at least, have been transmitted across cultural lines. Advocates of classical liberalism treat ideas with more seriousness. We believe ideas can, in principle, be independent of culture and heritage; that ideas can break free of the cultural and historical circumstances in which they were first articulated; that ideas can be reappropriated and reinterpreted in other cultural and historical circumstances in ways that still preserve the unity and consistency of those ideas. Since that is true, we have to recognize that ideology can be at least partly independent of culture, and thus culture does not wholly subsume ideology. There is a part of ideology that is acultural, not wholly determined by and dependent on culture. Nor is that true only of liberalism: socialism, Christianity, and nationalism itself have all jumped cultural borders and found new homes and new meanings in different lands. Try a common-sense test: have you ever learned from a book written in a different culture or historical context? Did you benefit from Aristotle's discussion of the virtues or Plato's dialogue on justice, from Dante's poetry, Shakespeare's plays, or Dostoevsky's novels? If so, recognize that though you do not live in ancient Greece, medieval Italy, renaissance England, or czarist Russia, you were able to take ideas and stories from those eras and make them meaningful in your context. Ideas can take on meaning outside of their originating culture.

By the same token, there must be a nonideological component of culture. If culture is "patterns of meaning," they are not all meanings about politics and society. There are meanings about life and death, the gods, our ancestors, what it means to be a good husband or wife, how to live well, the meaning of good friendship, what makes a good joke, how to face tragedy and suffer well, how to greet a guest and offer hospitality, what counts as good food or appropriate clothing, how to show respect and disrespect to others, and so forth. Our inherited patterns of meaning make up the whole of life, and the whole of life is vastly larger than the domain of politics and our meager political ideologies.

If you are having a hard time grasping that there are nonpolitical, nonideological aspects of life, you spend too much time on Twitter. The nonideological component of culture is, in principle, very large: it includes all the habits, mores, customs, quirks, foibles, preferences, peccadilloes, and idiosyncrasies that makes one place or people distinct from another.

The nationalist argument boils to down an assertion that ideology cannot survive if disconnected from these nonideological components of culture. We will lose who we are, they say, and imperil our experiment in free government if our culture changes too much. Taken to its logical extreme, their argument reduces to the belief that liberal democracy depends for its survival on the cultured habits of eighteenth-century English gentlemen. If that were true, democracy would have died a quick death a long time ago. Instead, it has enjoyed an almost miraculous global spread over the past two centuries, suggesting that the nationalist theory of the relationship between ideas and culture is wrong.

One last term, or set of terms, needs clarification. What is an *evangelical*, and why does it matter that so often we speak specifically of *White* evangelicals distinct from the non-White kind? Throughout this book I use the terms *White evangelical, White Christian, and Anglo-Protestant*, and critics may be uncomfortable with the imprecision implied by my usage. Who exactly are these people? The imprecision is built into my argument: in chapter four I argue that cultures have blurry boundaries and that they overlap and intermingle in ways that make strong demarcations impractical. The same is true of the historic ethnoreligious group marked by Anglo-American culture and by the norms and values (if not always the dogma) of early modern protesting Christianity—which is the group I generally have in mind when I use the terms *White evangelical* or *Anglo-Protestant*.

I am precise in one respect: by *evangelical*, I generally do not mean people who conform to the Bebbington quadrilateral—biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism—which is the standard scholarly definition of evangelicalism as defined religiously or theologically.[13] *Evangelical* has a long history and originally was a purely religious term that meant something like "Protestant who wishes to share the good news of Jesus Christ." But in the

[13]David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

twentieth- and twenty-first-century American context, the word *evangelical* now has a cultural, tribal, and political meaning. Samuel Huntington calls this culture "Anglo-Protestantism" to emphasize the Anglo-American roots of this tradition. It is important to note that this is a cultural or tribal unit, not a religious or racial one, and so it is possible for this culture to include non-Anglos, non-Whites, non-Protestants, and even non-Christians who otherwise conform to Anglo-Protestant culture, values, and norms. Much of this book is a sort of anthropology of cultural or tribal evangelicalism.

I generally use Huntington's term "Anglo-Protestant" and *White Protestant* to refer to the dominant American national culture prior to the 1960s. (I am not using it in reference only to the northeastern political and economic upper class of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, or WASPs, as is sometimes done.) I generally use *White evangelical* or *conservative White Christian* synonymously to refer to the post-1965 cultural and tribal (not theological) community of self-identified, politically engaged conservative White Christians regardless of their actual theological beliefs or religious practices (which is why it comes to include Catholics and people who do not attend church regularly). Where necessary, I distinguish between *religious evangelicals* or *church-going evangelicals*, on the one hand, referring to those who adhere to the historic and religious definition of evangelicalism as understood since the Reformation, and *tribal evangelicals*, referring to twentieth- and twenty-first-century American nationalists who believe America is a Christian nation and who participate in White evangelical culture, regardless of their religious beliefs. But by distinguishing between the two I do not mean to imply that they are entirely separate. They overlap more than they diverge and, I suspect, more than many White American Christians realize. Many American Christians fall into both categories; the question is not which category they belong to, but which takes precedence in their public lives. Different kinds of evangelicalism might mix in the same heart, but only one political agenda can predominate: the pursuit of tribal privilege and power, or the principled pursuit of justice for all.

A NOTE TO DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

I argue that Christian nationalism is a bad thing, inconsistent with both the ideals of the American experiment and important tenets of biblical

Christianity. But I face a dilemma in writing this book. The people who I believe most need its message are least likely to read it. Christian nationalists tend to be older, less educated, and more rural (and Whiter), not the typical target audience for an academic book of social science, history, political theory, and theology. This sort of book is likely to attract college students, seminarians, young pastors, urbanites, the educated general-interest reader, journalists, other scholars—all of whom are likely to already believe that Christian nationalism is a bad thing. Over 60 percent of millennials already reject Christian nationalism, according to one scholar.[14] I recognize that this book might be a long exercise in preaching to the choir.

But even the choir needs good teaching. I hope this book is useful for readers who already agree with its basic message by clarifying exactly what Christian nationalism is, *why* Christian nationalism is bad, and what its damaging implications are, thus equipping you to be better Christian witnesses in the public square and better teachers in your own churches, families, and schools—places where there almost certainly are a number of true believers in Christian nationalism. The most influential political discussions in America take place around the dinner table, at the local school, and during potluck after Sunday church services (or whatever the equivalent is to potluck for non-Baptists). I hope this book gives you more confidence and more knowledge to have those discussions. I also hope it is a model for how to engage the other side with good grace. You have a responsibility to be wise, gracious ambassadors of both true Christianity and a humble, affectionate, open patriotism.

I hope this book is useful for pastors, seminarians, church leaders, and other professional Christians for the same reason—leaders who often have more political influence than they are comfortable with. Some Christian leaders—especially White Christian pastors—who recognize the dangers of Christian nationalism have absorbed a functional quietism about politics, believing it to be inappropriate to engage too directly or too explicitly about political issues except abortion and religious liberty. "Just preach the gospel" is their common refrain. But quietism is itself a public, political stance: your congregants absorb the lesson that Christianity has no particular political implications except to endorse the pro-life movement, and thus there is no particular problem with

[14]Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 50.

the de facto Christian nationalism that dominates much of White evangelical political life. That implicit message is false. African American pastors are rarely drawn to quietism because their churches were vital in the fight for civil rights and have always been much more central to the social and political lives of their members. In other words, some White members of this choir sing too softly: I hope this book helps you see the inevitable and important responsibility we have to explicitly and vocally oppose the misuse of our faith in the public square, to proclaim the distinction between cultural evangelicalism and biblical Christianity.

Another set of readers might not stop at agreeing with this book's basic message. Many millennials, for example, have already come to their own conclusions about the dangers of Christian involvement in American politics—and some are overreacting by rejecting patriotism in addition to nationalism, by giving up on America altogether, leaving the Christian faith, or gravitating to other political ideologies that are as dangerous and foolish as the nationalism they reject. They are singing the wrong tune, and I would hope to gently bring them back to the score written in these pages. I have no desire to write another book of evangelical self-flagellation, or to give another ex-evangelical budding socialist a talking point to explain why he left the faith. While this book amounts to a pointed critique of Christian nationalism, readers should understand that I am writing about my own people, as I share in my story below. This book is (I hope) not an exercise in self-righteous judgment intoned from on high, but a pastoral and reflective engagement on a serious political theory that has deep roots in American history. I feel obligated as a Christian, a patriot, and a public intellectual to treat my interlocutors, no matter how gravely mistaken I believe them to be, with respect and charity. Readers expecting the frisson of Twitter snark will come away (mostly) disappointed. (You can follow me on Twitter—@pauldmiller2—for that.)

It is precisely because I assume most of my readers already agree with my basic argument, and some are at risk of going too far—of throwing the baby out with the bathwater—that I have included a positive vision of a healthy kind of patriotism and the outline of a theology of nationhood. This is the part of the book that may strike a discordant note with readers who are already skeptical of Christian nationalism. Truthfully, I am not fully comfortable doing so because of the curious dynamics that surround public debate. Readers usually filter what they read through the experience of contemporary events. If I say

anything positive about America or suggest there is any validity to national identity, some will jump to the conclusion that I am shilling for Trump or the Republican Party. In the face of contemporary realities—the ascendency of nationalism on the right—I feel a specific burden to focus my energy on critiquing, not justifying, the nationalist program. Even still, I argue that patriotism and American ideals are generally good. I do so because I believe these things to be true, because I believe this to be a message that millennials and younger readers specifically need to hear—and also because, as George Orwell argued, a healthy patriotism is the best inoculation against the dangers of nationalism. Some readers are probably so skeptical of group identity, so cynical about American history, and so alienated by the Trump presidency that they see no merit at all in American identity or national solidarity. I think this is a serious mistake both because it is theologically erroneous and also because it is politically counterproductive. If you want to oppose nationalism most effectively, you need to be a patriot. I have written this book to show that we can and should reject nationalism without rejecting America, and to illustrate that patriotism is not the slippery slope to nationalism but the best guardrail against it.

A note to two other potential audiences. If you are a Christian nationalist, I hope you find a faithful, accurate, and fair reconstruction of your ideology in chapter three—because I know you will also find an unstinting, blunt critique of it throughout the rest of the book. Please understand that I approach debate with a certain ethos: charity and magnanimity toward people I believe to be mistaken; but to mistaken *ideas*, no mercy. When I encounter ideas I believe to be mistaken, it is my job, my vocation, and my calling as a teacher and public intellectual to dissect those ideas, show them for their error, warn against them, and illustrate how damaging and destructive they can be, with every bit of evidence, reasoning, and rhetoric I can muster. Please do not take my intellectual zeal as personal contempt. I love you and pray for you, and I think your ideology is unjust, unwise, and dangerous.

Finally, it is possible that some readers come from outside this conversation. Progressives, Democrats, socialists, and Americans of other faiths or no faith at all might pick up this book. If so, you are welcome to listen in on this debate that is largely among evangelical Christians and Americans on the political right. Indeed, I hope you do, because the stakes of this debate are high for everyone, not just for conservative American Christians. Our intramural debate has profound consequences for the nation as a whole. In passing, you

will find occasional references to you and your movements and beliefs, but not in great detail. I obviously am not a progressive and I disagree with virtually everything the left stands for. You may be dissatisfied with my dismissive asides to your movement. That is not for lack of interest or belief in the importance of your ideas. Rather, engaging with your ideas is so important I intend to leave it for a separate book altogether.

MY STORY

I am a White American Christian. I am politically and theologically conservative (more on what that word actually means later). I was raised in what most observers would call a fundamentalist household. I've attended Baptist and nondenominational churches throughout my life. I "prayed the prayer" at the age of five. As a teenager I went to a Billy Graham Crusade in Portland, Oregon, in 1992. I was baptized in the Willamette River two years later in a scene of old-time religion straight out of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Politically, I was born and bred into social conservatism and the Republican Party, learning to vote on the basis of abortion and family values. My wife and I met and married at a Southern Baptist church at which we were happily members for ten years. To this day I am a theological traditionalist: I hold old-fashioned views about sin, hell, and the exclusivity of Christianity's truth claims. I am proudly pro-life and I am a zealot for religious liberty. I served for several years as an elder at a small Baptist church in Texas. I love eating at Chick-fil-A.

I am also a patriot. I served in the United States Army and I am a veteran of the war in Afghanistan. I spent nearly a decade working for the US government, including working in the White House for President George W. Bush. I read the Declaration of Independence to my kids on the Fourth of July (the famous bits, at least), and a selection of presidential Thanksgiving Day proclamations over turkey each November. I've lived in nine states and three countries and I am immensely proud to be an American (though I don't care for Lee Greenwood's schmaltzy country hymn) and grateful for the privilege of raising my three children here. If I sometimes doubt that the United States is the absolute single greatest country in the history of the universe, it is because I have an almost childlike admiration for the United Kingdom.

I firmly believe in the exceptional nature of the American experiment. This is an unpopular thing to say among my fellow scholars, for many of whom

American exceptionalism is a dirty word, an indication that I am probably a rube, possibly a bigot. Their suspicion isn't wholly unfounded: as I'll discuss later, there are many versions of American exceptionalism, some of which actually mean the opposite of what I mean. What I mean is this: as a matter of historical fact, the circumstances of America's founding are unique; the United States, unlike any other nation in the world at the time, claimed to be defined by a set of ideas; and those ideas have proven to be the most successful for ordered liberty, for the peaceful transfer of power, and for human flourishing in the history of human civilization.

But it is vital to recognize, despite how exceptional it was at the time, those ideals are no longer uniquely associated with America. American ideals of liberty are, in an important sense, not American. As world history since 1776 has proven, the ideals and institutions of a free society can be adapted across the world. American exceptionalism is *not* the view that we, uniquely, invented and live by the ideals of freedom and equality, or that we, uniquely, deserve freedom. Rather, it is the belief that we, uniquely, rediscovered and adapted a set of *universal* ideas to practical experience in a way that can be emulated and improved upon by the rest of humanity. As George W. Bush said in 2002, "America will lead by defending liberty and justice because they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere. No nation owns these aspirations, and no nation is exempt from them."[15]

I start with my religious and patriotic bona fides and my belief in American exceptionalism to help you understand that when I spend the rest of this book calling fire on Christian nationalism, I do it as an American patriot and an orthodox Christian—and I do it *because* of my patriotism and my Christian faith, not despite them. When I warn against nationalism, I am not doing so from the left. My critique of one side is not an endorsement of the other. My alienation from the Republican Party has not driven me into the arms of the opposition. I firmly call down a plague on both their houses. Not only am I pro-life, I find the Democratic Party's emerging view on religious liberty deeply alarming. I have written elsewhere at greater length about the problems I see with the left and the Democratic Party.[16] I remain more or less politically

[15]George W. Bush, "State of the Union," January 29, 2002.

[16]See Paul D. Miller, "The Twenty-First Century Federalist," *Perspectives on Politics* 46, no. 1 (2017): 51-57; "The Perils of Croly's Promise," *National Affairs* 39 (Spring 2019); and "Politics Is More Than Abortion vs. Character," *Mere Orthodoxy*, November 2, 2020.

conservative, in the pre-2016 sense of the word; I only lament that the Republican Party no longer is.

In other respects I am not a typical White evangelical, beginning with an upbringing and a family that—to lean on cliché—looks like America in its ethnic diversity. Later, I served in the most ethnically and racially integrated institution in America: the US Army. I've lived and worked most of my adult life in large, diverse cities that don't look like red America. I have extensive international experience. I have a passport (less than half of Americans do) and have visited a dozen foreign countries for work, education, and tourism. I served in Afghanistan alongside troops from around the world in our multinational coalition, including Afghan troops. I waited tables at a restaurant in Washington, DC, alongside a Palestinian who faithfully took breaks every few hours to lay out his rug in the basement, face east toward Mecca, and say his prayers. I taught military officers from across Africa and Asia at the National Defense University in Washington, DC. I once had to shout down two students, a Libyan and an American, who were near blows over disagreements about US foreign policy; lectured on political Islam to Egyptians and Saudis; and taught geo-strategy to Pakistanis and Indians in the same class who dutifully took notes on how to use my lessons against each other. I have graduate degrees, hold a top-secret security clearance, served in the CIA, and have attended meetings in the Oval Office.

These experiences helped me gain something of an outsiders' perspective on my community. I know my bluntness may offend some friends and family, but I also owe it to them to be honest: in my observation, middle-class White American evangelicals living in red states can be surprisingly ignorant of the rest of our country, let alone the world; deaf to self-criticism; and curiously incurious to learn about people who are different from them. The same is true, of course, of the college-educated White American progressives living in blue states with whom I have spent most of my career. The difference is that while conservatives are proud of their bubble, progressives deny they are in one.

My background, experience, and beliefs have made me politically and culturally homeless. In early 2016, I signed the "Open Letter on Donald Trump from GOP National Security Leaders."[17] My stance against Trump put me in a

[17]"Open Letter on Donald Trump from GOP National Security Leaders," War on the Rocks, March 2, 2016, https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/open-letter-on-donald-trump-from-gop-national-security-leaders/.

tiny minority among Republicans—and, even more so, among my fellow White evangelical Christians. Famously, 81 percent of self-identified White evangelicals reported voting for him, and Trump consistently enjoyed his highest approval rating among White evangelicals compared to any other religious or cultural group throughout his presidency. Several evangelical leaders contrived explanations for why Trump's policies were not merely morally permissible but the best and possibly only way of keeping America safe. After Trump's loss in the 2020 election, some White evangelicals were at the forefront of spreading falsehoods about the integrity of the election. The 81 percent of White evangelicals who voted for Donald Trump are my people. They are my friends, neighbors, and family, including some of the people with whom I share a pew on Sundays. I grew up with them and agree with them on the most important issues of faith and the meaning of human life.

Since I am in such a small minority, the burden of proof is on me to explain why I believe my erstwhile political comrades and coreligionists are wrong to have taken up the banner of nationalism. That requires a deeper discussion of American nationalism: its theory, its history, and its theology. It does not require rehashing our debates about Trump's personality and temperament, which are immaterial to the broader political movement he represents. To be candid, I believed in 2016 that Trump was personally unqualified for public office because of his character and temperament; I think his presidency vindicated my concerns; I publicly argued for his impeachment and conviction in 2019 because of his criminal conduct;[18] and I will repeat all of these concerns if Trump runs again in 2024. But I have mostly chosen to ignore those issues in this book and focus instead on nationalist ideology, beliefs, and the broader social and cultural movement Trump represents, which predate Trump and will outlast him. I am more concerned about what Trump stands for and what he represents, about the deeper and broader cultural wave he is riding: the wave of nationalism, especially the sort that puts a Christian gloss on American identity. Nationalism—as distinct from patriotism—is a dangerous ideology. Trump's rise and his embrace by my erstwhile political friends and allies helped me to look afresh at the American political right and at American history. This book is my effort to share what I've seen.

[18]Paul D. Miller, "Five Reasons Every American Should Oppose Donald Trump," *The Federalist,* February 29, 2016; Paul D. Miller, "Convict Trump: The Constitution Is More Important Than Abortion," *The Christian Post*, December 22, 2019.

InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com